

JOHN BROWN—A CHAPTER FROM THE LIFE OF
EDWIN MILLER WHEELOCK.

BY CHARLES KASSEL.

THE biographical sketch of the author of *Proteus*, published in the September issue, 1920, of the *Open Court*, was a sweeping summary which traced the career of this brilliant writer and preacher, from his pastorate of a Unitarian church in Dover, New Hampshire, before the Civil War, through his period of military service with the Northern armies at New Orleans, and his incumbency of various offices under the Reconstruction Government in Texas, down to his death in 1901, at Austin in that state, where, during his later years, he served as the minister of a Unitarian congregation.

In the issue of the *Open Court* for February, 1922, the present writer dealt with the discourse upon the execution of John Brown, delivered in the first instance at Dover and re-delivered later in Boston, and which at once gave its author a noteworthy place among the abolitionist crusaders, and we saw how prophetic that utterance was and how clearly the young preacher foresaw what was so soon to follow. The paper in the March issue, 1923, filled in the background for the "John Brown Sermon," and reviewed its author's antecedents as an abolitionist and his connection with the anti-slavery movement.

In all the annals of time it would be difficult to find a story of more melancholy interest than the history of negro slavery in the South. Tolerated originally as a temporary institution, with the finest intellects, even among the Southern leaders, set against it, the system crept like a subtle poison over the whole surface of Southern thought, until every mind was charged with the venom.

In the earlier day, the spectacle of John Brown, with his courage and his fanatical sincerity, would have awakened an instinctive re-

spect upon the part of a naturally chivalrous people. As it was, the figure of the old abolitionist was a hateful sight, and southern feeling, wrought to the boiling point, saw in him, as later it saw in Lincoln, the embodiment of forces at work for the South's undoing.

It is a powerful testimony to the essential nobility of the Southern people that, even among minds reared in the very atmosphere of the struggle, and with the recollection of bitter suffering and privation in the background of memory, the name of Brown is spoken with becoming reverence now as the apostle, not only of freedom for the slave, but of freedom for the South itself—freedom from an institution which would ultimately have strangled all that was best in Southern life.

The bearing of Brown, his generous feeling toward his captors, and, above all, his remarkable letters written during his imprisonment, published as they were at the time in the leading Northern journals, produced a profound impression both in this country and abroad. Men held their breath as they inquired what manner of man this was and what the cause he was so ready to die for. Do what they would, they could not cast off the memory of martyrdoms in other climes and ages, and thoughts tinged with something like religious feeling stirred at the spectacle of the wounded and stricken old man meeting death at the noose's end.

It was a foolish thing, on the part of the South, to provide the cause of abolition with its martyr, particularly when upon his lips an undoubted Christian fervor burned. One might fancy that the tutelary deities of the South were shrieking in the ears of Southern leaders against the 'deep damnation of his taking off', but those ears were deaf with passion and sealed against the voice of wisdom.

To his brother Brown wrote from prison, "I am quite cheerful in view of my approaching end, being fully persuaded that I am worth inconceivably more to hang than for any other purpose," and to his old teacher, "As I believe most firmly that God reigns I cannot believe that anything I have done will be lost to the cause of God or humanity, and before I began my work at Harper's Ferry I felt sure that in the worst event it would certainly pay." In the same strain he expressed himself to his cousin, "When I think how easily I might be left to spoil all I have done or suffered in the cause of freedom I hardly dare wish another voyage, even if I had the opportunity."

There was no prayer that the cup might pass from him—on the contrary, he thought of his fate with deep satisfaction. "I feel just as content to die for God's eternal truth on the scaffold," he said in a

letter to his younger children "as in any other way," and to his older children on the same day he wrote, "As I trust my life has not been thrown away so I humbly trust that my death will not be in vain."

These letters were words of comfort merely to his kindred and his friends. For the nation at large, and particularly for those who had encompassed his destruction, a more solemn word was reserved, and he awaited the hour which would make its delivery most impressive.

On the day of his execution, with the moment of doom but a few hours off, he gave this his last written message to the world—a prophecy appallingly true to the event and which, as the word of a dying man, yielding his life for a great cause, must have borne a fearful meaning to sensitive natures everywhere: "I, John Brown, am quite certain that the sins of this guilty land will never be purged away but with blood. I had, as I now think vainly, flattered myself that without very much bloodshed it might be done."

It is difficult to overstress the effect of such utterances upon the Northern imagination. Once read, they would not out from the memory. The high joy of the condemned man in his fate, his solemn and impressive statements and the religious tone which pervaded his deliverances, could not fail of touching a deep and responsive chord. When, later, the war which Brown had foretold became a reality, and Northern women were sending their husbands and their sons to die for the nation, all he had said and written seemed a long resounding blast from a prophet's trumpet, and the ballad of the man who died a felon's death for humanity's sake became the marching song of embattled hosts.

On Monday night, following the outbreak at Harper's Ferry, Col. Robert E. Lee reached the scene with one hundred marines and sent a flag of truce to notify Brown of his arrival and in the name of the United States to demand his surrender. That demand was refused and in the demand and its refusal there was something strangely, even mystically, symbolic.

Brown was of the type which had suffered for opinion's sake through the ages. His first American ancestor, Peter Brown, had come over in the Mayflower in 1620. His were of the folk among whom Cromwell's Ironsides had been recruited. Lee, on the other hand, himself the perfection of Southern chivalry, was distinctly the representative of those polished and graceful Cavaliers who fought for king and country against the Roundheads. Such indeed, were the traditions in the family of Lee. In the attitude, now, of the grim

abolitionist toward the great Southern soldier the Puritanism of the old days stood again militant, and the contact of those men, the embodiment of antagonistic forces in that crisis, was a fitting augury of what was shortly to follow.

It is strange that the drift of events was so little apparent to minds at the North. The belief in the practicability of a compromise still held fast all Northern thought, and the suggestion of war as a possible outcome of the slavery issue was laughed away by all leaders of opinion except a few penetrating minds here and there.

Seeing the obtuseness at the North to the signs of the approaching conflict, we may wonder the more that, as early as the close of 1859, in the sermon upon the execution of John Brown, the young pastor from Dover had the insight to perceive and the courage to announce that from the martyrdom of Brown should date a new era in the anti-slavery cause and that to moral agitation would thenceforth be added the agitation of force. Nor can we fail to marvel at the confident prediction that the talk of violence which the preceding year had affected even anti-slavery men with a shudder would be uttered the following year in every Northern legislature as a thing of course. Even to the great audience at the Music Hall, though fresh from the anti-slavery teaching of Theodore Parker himself, it must have seemed quite a far-fetched prophecy that within a few years the very ground upon which John Brown had stood in his attack upon slavery would be occupied by the entire North.

It is a circumstance of curious interest that the foresight at the North which could pierce the future, and lift the veil from the terrible storm brewing, was confined almost exclusively to John Brown sympathizers. Governor Andrew had been an admirer of Brown and with Montgomery Blair had retained special counsel for the defense of the prisoner, and Governor Andrew, as we have seen, prepared the militia of his state for war shortly after his inauguration in 1861, against the derisive cries of the Republicans of his own State. So, Longfellow wrote in his journal: "That will be a great day in our history, the date of a new revolution quite as much noted as the old one. Even now, as I write, they are leading old John Brown to execution in Virginia for attempting to rescue the slave! This is sowing the wind to reap the whirlwind, which will come soon." Again, Victor Hugo, living at that moment in exile for the cause of human liberty, commented prophetically upon the spectacle which the enlightened people of Europe were beholding with bated breath. "In killing Brown the Southern States have committed a crime which

will take its place among the calamities of history. A rupture of the Union will fatally follow the assassination of Brown.

Such forevision was not vouchsafed to the political leaders of the time at the North, though at the South Davis and Stephens, knowing the temper of their own people, realized the conflict could not be put off. "We are now" says Schouler as his narrative approaches the fateful year of 1861, "on the verge of a terrible civil conflict, cruel and sanguinary as the world ever saw. Private citizens in many respects saw its approach more clearly than statesmen long experienced in public life. Events hurried to the climax of arms before either side was well aware of it. In the free states more especially, so strong had become the habit of believing in the perpetuity of the Union that men clung tenaciously to the idea that political craft would span the situation as it had often done before; that new negotiations, honorable or otherwise, some new bundle of mutual concessions, would bolster up the old link of social systems. Not until the rash cannon of South Carolina thundered at Fort Sumter was the illusion dispelled."

Greely, as we are told by Oswald Garrison Villard in his life of John Brown, had said, "I believe the end of slavery in Virginia and the Union is ten years nearer than it was a few years ago." But Greely had scant sympathy with Brown and there was, in his case, little of the intuitive forevision which marks men of the type of him whose story we write. The feeling of Brown, of Longfellow, of Hugo, and of Wheelock was truer, for within less than two years from the execution of John Brown the slave-holding states had seceded from the Union, the Southern Confederacy had been organized, and the first blow of the war had been struck.

Many decades before, Thomas Jefferson, pondering the problem of chattel slavery, had uttered the solemn warning:

"Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that this people are to be free. It is still in our power to direct the processes of emancipation and deportation in such slow degree that the evil will wear off insensibly and their way be paripassu filled up with free white laborers. If, on the contrary, it is left to go on human nature must shudder at the prospect held up."

The hour had now come when the awful catastrophe of which Jefferson had given warning was ready to break and the young prophet from Dover knew that events would hasten to a climax.